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SUBJECT: KIDNAPPERS RELEASE ITALIAN PRIEST

REF: MANILA 2099

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Under Secretary of Foreign Affairs for Special Concerns Rafael Seguis on July 20 confirmed to Pol/C press reports that kidnappers had freed Italian priest Father Giancarlo Bossi late on July 19 in Karumatan, Lanao Del Norte Province after 39 days of captivity. He insisted that the Philippine government had not paid any ransom, but privately admitted working behind the scenes, including obtaining "proof of life" on July 18, in coordination with Italian authorities.

¶2. (U) Philippine National Police (PNP) Region 9 Chief Superintendent Jaime Caringal separately told the media that there had been no ransom payment, and claimed that former mayor of Tuburan, Basilan Hajarun Jamiri had "facilitated" the release. He attributed the release also to "relentless" military and police operations in search of Father Bossi. However, PNP Director General Oscar Calderon admitted to the media that officials had paid a small "boarding fee."

¶3. (U) During a July 20 televised press conference in Zamboanga City, Bossi said his abductors (originally eleven, later dropping to five individuals) had identified themselves as members of the Abu Sayyaf Group, but had treated him "with respect." After the press conference, Bossi flew to Manila to meet President Arroyo and the Italian Ambassador. Despite a considerable weight loss, Bossi appeared in high spirits and expressed his resolve to rejoin his parishioners in Zamboanga Sibugay.

¶4. (SBU) Sources in the PNP and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have separately indicated their belief that at least some elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, perhaps in conjunction with elements of the ASG, had been involved in the kidnapping. Troops continue to hunt for the abductors, at least three of whom the PNP has reportedly identified, including a "Commander Khidi" of the MILF.

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